

**Message to Counselors and the Public from Mark S. Woodford, Ph.D., LPC, MAC
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In what seemed to be a casual conversation at the time, one of my graduate students asked me what's out there for people in long term recovery. She was particularly interested in programs that address the profound nutritional deficits and compromised health of people whose bodies were ravaged by years of drinking alcohol. "This is an empty niche," was my reply, which was repeated as Dorothy talked to other addictions professionals.

Suppers for Sobriety was originally conceived as a means of including care of the physical body in the recovery equation. Following medical detox, which is a heroic, intensely physical process, the support for alcoholics in recovery is largely, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive. If they have access to health care, it is also psychological and psychopharmacological. But the needs of their physical bodies are still complicated, and to date, neither the recovery culture nor the medical system offers a free-to-users program that deals directly with the damaged cells, destabilized blood sugar and mood chemistry, or poor eating habits of individuals in recovery from addiction. This is the empty niche that Suppers for Sobriety seeks to fill.

Over the next few years, Dorothy ran her ideas for the program design past me. From a counselor's eye viewpoint, what she proposed was a program capturing the spirit of the harm reduction model and blending it with principles from the 12-step programs and nutrition.

Unlike other addictions – cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, gambling – there is no possibility of applying an abstinence model to food. Everyone has to eat; and people in recovery typically gravitate to the refined foods that provide relief from low blood sugar and poor mood. That left harm reduction thinking as the guiding principle for the program design: show people how to move from harm-producing habits toward healthier habits. The challenge was to create a non-judgmental environment that offered people the possibility of moving in the direction of health at their own speed.

When we talk about the societal and human price exacted by addictions, how and what counts as a consequence of the addictive behavior determines how expensive an addiction is to the culture and the people. In the Suppers model, the national food supply is deemed the most expensive addiction because it counts the skyrocketing rates of obesity and diabetes as consequences, as well as heart disease and nutritional biochemically-mediated anxiety and depression. The addiction expresses itself in a person's inability to resist processed food and beverages, even while knowing he or she would be better off not having them.

After years of drinking, alcoholics in recovery are very likely to seek refined foods like cookies, candy, and coffee because they *are* such effective first aid for cravings and poor mood. The price for near term relief, however, is a bigger problem over time. What Suppers for Sobriety seeks to offer is a learn-by-doing program where it's safe to try on new behaviors. Members learn to cook together and slowly develop a taste for healthier foods in a supportive, homey environment. They get support journaling the experience so they can discover for themselves their personal best meal plans. There's no pressure to quit coffee or sweets before one is ready, just "therapeutic friends" ready to support the process when the person is ready.

A final research-based component of the program is its emphasis on the restoration of the family dinner table. In keeping with the research coming out of Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse on family dinners, Suppers for Sobriety and its spinoffs all seek to restore the habit of eating at a family table. The current

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iteration is Suppers for Teens, a prevention program where adolescents learn to prepare healthy food to take home to their family table.

What better place to support the long-term recovery of the body, the mind and the spirit than at the family dinner table. I believe that Suppers for Sobriety, with its emphasis on modeling a nutritional harm reduction approach, has the potential to have a healing effect that will ripple through the generations of those families that choose to participate in this integrative program.